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The Role of Modernism in Shaping 20th-Century English Literature

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Abstract

The current study discusses here the significant role of modernism in shaping the development of twentieth-century English literature, placing the process of modernism within the broader historical, cultural and intellectual frameworks of that period. The current study have shown how the broad socio-political technological shifts, which have run through the post-World Wars landscape, the loss of imperial hegemony, the rise of feminist, postcolonial and ecological discourse have reconstituted the very principles of literary creativity. James Joyce and Virginia Woolf were the main auteurs of the modernist fashion of innovative narrative methods, which included fragmentation, interior monologue, and psychological profoundness, to capture the disrupted nature of modern life. The paper also examines the overlap between literature and the emerging ideological trends that defied power, reconstructed conceptions of identity and expanded the representational possibilities. Moreover, the gradual evolution of the media and technology, the films and radio, and the spread of the print culture modified the production and reception of literature, and the increased ecological awareness brought new aspects of human-nature relations. The findings show that modernism brought about dynamic relationship between continuity and disruption, tradition and innovation. Finally, modernism was not only a reformer of the literary expression, but also a kind of catalyst of long-lasting changes in the cultural and philosophical life, still present in the modern intellectual discussion.

Keywords: Modernism, English Literature, Cultural Change, Feminism, Postcolonial Theory, Technology, Environmental Awareness.



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1. Introduction

The English literature and the English society were undergoing radical changes during the time span between 1888 and 1956, with much innovation. The latter was filled with a sense of the world as a place of growing possibility, to which these themes gave conscious connotations of modernity; modern criticism makes it a common practice to read the literature of the twentieth century in terms of that change. A prominent theme of change can be used to characterize Victorian culture, namely, the relationship between constants and variables, between social reconfiguration and stable moral values, and locations of identity. In comparison, the twentieth century requires an analysis which is very different. Researchers have generally described the period as a transition period in all the areas of human existence, and they have located abundant textual materials to support this claim. Simmer of the literature written between the years 1888 and 1956, are thousands of plots tracing the breakthroughs in science and technology, the uproar of political change on an international level and the restructuring of societal forms caused by these factors. (Poplawski, 2022)

1.1. Background and Context

Twentieth-century English literature is inherently the subject of change and novelty. The century was marked by a cluster of historical events of monumental nature: the two World Wars, the monarchy abdication, the Great Depression, the quick rise of new political forces, decolonisation, the Cold War and the powers of modern globalization, to be named a few. These historical events, as well as cultural, social, intellectual life, influenced the thematic interests of the great writings in the same way they influenced the lives of separate authors and the masses. Rebellion, creativity, and how far people could re-organize their identities, personalities or world-views are thus common thematic pillars in the literature of this era.

Different turns in the art, political philosophy, and other spheres of society triggered different dissimilar trends in the English-language literature, including the revitalization of Commonwealth-era theatre at the end of the nineteenth century and the Beat poetry as well as post-neo-classical inclinations of the twentieth-century authors. This chapter dwells on mainstream aspects of the literature of this period. The essays examine a broad range of experimentation and the enormous thematic variety that was experienced during the classical texts of the time. This continual interaction of poets with the ideologies, standards, phenomena, and socio-economic and political circumstances that they occupied places a unifying thread which links most of the major literature of the period. (Matheson-Hooker, 2021)



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Literary Movements and Innovations.

The century of the twentieth was characterized by the abundance of new literary trends sharing the story of revolution, which meant not only what writing was but what it can and should be. By the turn of the two centuries, the world was redefined by the carnages of the World Wars, interwar depression, the Great War, the Russian Revolution, the Good Friday Rising and the Indian Mutiny; which ultimately made the British Empire a group of the Commonwealth states. The US has become the world hegemony and created the League of Nations thus changing the generally accepted understanding of history, the world, and the role of man in it.

In literature, this period marked the end of traditional realism and the beginning of the modernist experimentation, the echoes of which could be felt up to the present time in the studies of modernist literature. The features of this innovation can be distinguished by the substance of novels moving to characterless as well as formless narratives; to the linear narratives with definite beginnings, middles and ends to fragmented or interwoven plots; to the third-person narration which is reliable and to the first-person narration which is unreliable; by the definite end, middle, and beginning of the story to the indefinite conclusion, middle, and commencement of the story. The writers led the way in changing the very form of the novel through their interaction with such concepts as socialism, communism, the rise of industrial society, the new leisure culture, and the loss of faith as a result of scientific advancement. (Gunning, 2022)

2.1. Modernism

In the twentieth century, modernism was an influential intellectual movement that has had an indelible influence on literary production. Fragmentation can be defined as a hallmark of Modernist work, their plots are often disjointed and make no definite, unified shape. Rather they are in motion, transform or lack lines of origin and closure. One more characteristic is the so-called method of stream of consciousness, which is quite similar to internal monologue. This technique attempts to recreate the flowing, associative quality of the human mind and the thoughts of a character appear as an uninterrupted stream that can be cut or redirected down the page.

In most ways, modernism may be understood as a reaction to the pressures of a fast changing and at times bewildering modern world. The twentieth century was one of rapid industrialisation, urbanisation and immense social and political havoc. Modernist authors also



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strived to portray the simplicity and movement of modern life and resorted to philosophical roots. James Joyce and Virginia Woolf are the bright representatives of the intellectual energy of the movement and evidenced the ability to create new areas of narrative and abandon tradition. The impact of modernism does not end with modernism, whereby postmodernism reflects some modernist leanings and tries to destroy grand narratives in Western literature and philosophy. (Maher, 2020)

Social and Political Change

Twentieth century was the century of great social and political revolution which made its implacable traces in English literature. Authors frequently addressed the theme of change and acculturation making literature not only the mirror of the historical events but the creation that was shaped by the specifics of the historical environment. The two World Wars had a definite impact, leading to such movements like modernism that wanted to overcome the impact of war, and postmodernism that adopted the impact of war. As a result, the literary production of the time is dominated by the themes of social and political change as a reflection of the overall discourse and as a commentary on the changing atmosphere.

The literature on change, innovation, and adaptation may tend to show the interest of the writers to the implications of the significant public, social, and political events of the twentieth century. The World Wars are considered traumatic events, which are often packaged in a way that brings change in the thematic focus, characterisation, narrative structure, and social commentary. On the one hand literature may act as an escape mechanism where the reader may get lost in the characters but on the other hand it also acts as the window to the social and political realities of the present time. Therefore, literature regularly makes remarks, indeed in certain instances criticisms, upon such contemporary states of affairs, which cannot easily be done in the abstract history of things. By so doing, such works tend to make use of the rhetorical and metonymic devices to shed light on the constructs of societal change.

The milieu of the twentieth century is also struggling with the problem of power, both literally, as the after-effects of the Russian Revolution were spread to other parts of the world, and metaphorically, as the characters struggle with an irrepressible urge to control. The outcome of such concerns is a variety of portrayals, utopian to dystopian, positive to negative. The historical contexts of these readings help us deepen into the dynamics of literature, politics and society in their interlacing aspects. (Sondhaus, 2020)1.1. Impact of World Wars



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The English literature has been radically transformed by the World Wars, leaving their inalienable traces on the theme issues and genres of the twentieth century prose. They transformed the worldviews of readers, their personal and social perspectives, and daily routines, and spread their impact into the final decades of the Victorian era, which announced a generation of disillusionment and the loss of a sense of optimism that had existed before them. The war especially World War 1, shifted towards more than a formal protest and took on new ways to read existence, the sense of change, and awareness of change, overlapping with experimentation of modernism. As a result, the war literature has used the manipulation of the form and expression to reflect the dialectics of ending, beginning, temporality, and eternity. Memories of the modern social world may hasten the process of the development of the story; but the historical aspect is killed off, or even enriched, by the leftover of war memory. These dynamics are visible in the form of transparent, unified, and present moment orientation in narrative style. Emphasis on the theme is further diluted by explicit appeals to anguish and sufferings as they are contextualised in the context of coldness of a godless god. Those who face suffering, demise, and renunciation, take the shock of the change and question the truth of appearances. Due to this, change is driven by frustration, optimism and vigilance against the vagaries of life and this ends in the destruction of the unsuspecting personalities. Such attitude becomes the source of doubts about the spiritual conditions of life, formal lexical, verbal, and syntactic production, and forms of expression as the direct results of everyday wartime experiences that are manifested in an explosion of works (Mawdsley, 2020).

Technological Advancements

Even though the literary writing first appeared in parallel with the mechanization, the twentieth century brought the nexus to the fore of the technological change and creative output. The telephone, the radio, and later the film, telecommunications made a revolution in the process of story dissemination and enabled the stories to be visual, aural or simply visual and acoustic. Technology started having an influence on the form as well as the thematic content of literature.

The increase in mass consumption of the high-art forms brought a debate: is it time to incorporate modernistic writing with the new media or stay isolated? This questioning was reflected in the 1924 radio play which explicitly used the technology of telephones in the plot. New genres were also on the way: especially dystopian literature looked forward to a new set of technological discoveries by the end of the century, leading to a new science-fiction



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culture. H. G. In antecedent literature such as the war of the worlds and the first men in the moon, Wells was writing about technological implications long before they would materialise. Another film version created in 1988, though thematically resonant but not a faithful adaptation, was based on modern-day Tokyo, and the use of animation added other speculative stratum, specifically about futures (Markard et al., 2020).

2.1. Influence of Radio and Film

Conventionally, the first-order approach of writers is that of readers; audio-visual narrative styles have percolated through the literature practice. The introduction of wireless radio changed the competitive environment of the audience attention capitalising on immediacy. In the commissioning of programmes, the radio listeners were offered a wide range of disciplines, which indirectly involved them in the synthesised interests of the narrative of both fiction writers and journalists.

Cinematographic discourses also created more publicity over visual representation other than prose. The uncontrollable interplay of oral -auditory broadcasting and lexical composition in the development of literary narratives, be it in cooperation or competition, ultimately led to the introduction of visual image. Parallel literary development acknowledges the creation of intimate readerships by broadcasters, thus, challenging the ethical consideration by the use of chronic storytelling. In film economics, the destiny of one single person, completely personified by an actor in sequences that are far apart, can have a dramatic effect (Hovious et al.).

Gender and Identity

It is one of the peculiarities of the English literature of the twentieth century, which addresses the necessity to push readers one decade after another to reconsider the nature of art and its role and to inspect the agents of its production. Gender is one of the main fault lines that manifest themselves in various forms representations of women not only as archetypes, but also as writers and dialogists in literary discourse. The literary analysis of woman stretches out in a continuum including mothers, daughters, feminists, artists, factory workers, religious leaders, scholars, servants, vampires, sports stars, sex workers, wise women, nurses, murderers, national matriarchs, and sexual performers, highlighting the role fluidity in the many roles.

In addition to gender, there is the issue of identity that draws attention, particularly on women who have been alienated or even antagonised by the very process of being a woman. The



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definitions that are fluid, ambivalent and many times contradictory are permeated throughout the literature. A global literary consciousness is shaped by the marginalisation discourse of women, cultures and alternative humanity. The study of national, cultural and postcolonial identifications sheds light on the sense of belonging of women and their reproductive power. Such readings that challenged ordered identity-construction established during the era of publication when there was some political feminism, gave rise to narratives that had unambiguous identities of either I or we. This emphasis recursively recontextualises all gestures of resistance or submission, aesthetic innovation, or social realism act, and so projects the politics of the current time and emerges the writers and critics within communities of time and interpretation who assert dominance or marginality in the faculty of language. The whole history of English writing, as well as literature in general, can be understood, in the end, by reading the story and poems that ask themselves: Who is this representing whom, and how? or Who is in the house, and who is out of the house? (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020).

Feminist Literature

The influences of feminism on the English literature have been such that a whole semester study can be devoted to this section alone. The earliest written account of feminist writing started in the twelfth century where religious heresy trials were undertaken against the Cathars who possessed a literature called the Troubadours. Amongst these 408 cases, the great majority were non-violent feminists. Feminist literary advocacy that demanded equality and feminist movement was strong and expanding during the twentieth century. All literature is not as extensive as this. Besides, feminist works, which do not promote equal rights and suffrage, are out of this course.

Feminist literature that started gaining momentum during the twentieth century became an underground cry to the people who called upon equal rights, equal pay, and equal representation in the literature. The primary demand that the feminist literary movement placed was that women should be fairly represented in literature, although at a certain stage it expanded to include the rights of women. In general, the role of women in the society as advocated by feminist literature has been less strict as compared to the views of traditional male authors. Where feminist literature suppresses the women, the same is seen in the narrative and women are prominent and conspicuous and not inferior to men. Within the limits of drama, the works affect a distinct perspective on authority, depiction, singularity, and entitlement that overlays with proto-feminist reflections. The other thematic issues that define the conventional feminist work include the issues of agency, empowerment, and



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autonomy. It should be mentioned that though feminist literature is predominantly associated with the claims that all women that can identify themselves should have equal rights, the thesis also features a specific reference to race, classes, and sexuality that it overlaps with feminism. Various allusions are made to non-course readings which are authored by various authors and materials, all of which are worth adding to your exposure to feminism and literature. As our culture starts to reason like that, inclusive work will one day also be considered feminist, and hence this categorization will mutate over time. Considering your response to questions on your writing of your answers to the prompts in your critique of feminist literature, ask yourself about the changing messages and changing eras. (Sangster, 2021)

Postcolonial Perspectives

Although postcolonial approaches have a specific advantage in their emphasis on the impact of colonialism and decolonization, which are also crucial themes of change and innovation, there is more need to bridge the gap to indicate the interrelation of the two aspects: colonialism and diaspora. Another thing that should be investigated is those characteristics that have always been attributed to postcolonial writing. These are the concept of hybrid identities that emphasize that one should be able to negotiate and renegotiate affiliations to his/her culture in a far-from-settled world, and the ambivalent nostalgia and alienation that usually comes with it. A sharp cultural memory signifies the process of remembering, grieving and celebrating the eroded or re-taken tradition. This memory is also related to a potential of opposition to both written and unwritten regulations that perpetuate colonialist discourses, but it is the one that is responsible of broadcasting a new historical and cultural awareness.

Although a priori labels may be seen as dubious, like postmodern, poststructuralist, and open-ended signification, the diaspora literature phenomenon throughout the world is surely a good indication that various nations, various ethnic minorities and the ever-growing number of diasporas are coming to understand the bountifulness of the differences in the form of representation, hence the respect of the heterogeneity of the world population. In most instances, thus, discussions surrounding the world are interred with those of feminist, poststructuralist, and, more commonly, postmodern thinking, not to mention that ethnicity, not merely race or gender, is entangled in these discussions. A result of such is the confusion of languages that can hardly be differentiated. What is needed to be put into focus is how colonial writing is reflexively the process and problems of becoming a postcolonial writer in



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a former master language and the issue of language as a tool of domination and a cultural heritage. Thus, at the behest of the literature of modernism, empire, and resistance, the writers are getting more diverse in dialect and language but first of all is the necessity to negotiate with the colonial legacy, combining English with their mother tongue and occasionally even with a variety of native dialects. It is evident thus that postcolonial literature is powerfully informative in the fact that it can lead to resistance and also oppose the assumptions that define a number of coexisting power regimes. (Dube, 2020).

2.1. The Decolonization and Literature.

Colin Legum, a British anti-apartheid activist who studied in South Africa termed decolonization as a two-step process. Political act, as he explains, is apparent. It is of foreign devils making their run. On the contrary, it is more challenging and time-consuming, as the so-called psychological process that presupposes massive transfer of power at all tiers. Though political decolonization is official and recognizable, the alteration of colonized countries implies the shifting of all types of relationships, attitudes and assumptions.

Decolonization has greatly influenced literature during the twentieth century. Behind it, new voices may be heard and new ways were taken in the story. One of the conditions was the radical revision of the national history and the restoration of the original cultures. This was concerned with the resistance of the colonized, the phrase at the time often used in the literature to refer to politics: suddenly, the subaltern was able to speak on his/her own behalf. Precisely, there is still a lot of controversy regarding the term postcolonial that has grown internationally to take on new meanings. This word is detested by many writers, and even literary critics because it gives rather a vague concept as regards the broad spectrum of meaning that the word can take. Individuals like Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Derek Walcott called the term what occurred following the departure of colonizers in the colonies. In a broader application, others would rather understand postcolonial as an implication of life after any form of imperialism, economically, politically, and culturally. Clearly, that has provided some form of transition of colonialism to decolonization which includes the struggle of economic and political independence as well as the identity and culture struggle.

This is a commendable concern in literature but not panacea despite the fact that it is a new concern in decolonization. Like all works that tend to put in writing a movement so general, there seems to be an apparent loss of the particulars of a multiplicity of individual actions, as clustered together by a set of similarities or even likenesses, to create a great edifice of



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thoughts and practices that can be called postcolonialism. Besides this, Walker is extremely pessimistic adopting literature over cultural studies or anthropology in the far reaching discussion of the post-colonial and she squarely addresses that the majority of the works are in a very pessimistic tone. She puts emphasis on the aspect of vastly complicated strain between the autonomy of language and the colossal strength of religion without encroaching on the domain of prayers by competitors. Finally, the last argument can be roughly sorted out in two acts. To begin with, the reliability of the strength of Africa and its reliability can be questioned due to the supremacy acquisition. It can happen in, even though it is not confined to, a sincere and emotionally charged narrative that is delivered orally as well. It simply gives an account of the fact that the strength of folklore exists! Creativity and fiction are an essential part of the act of writing whereas narrative is not. (Gordon, 2020) Environmental Concerns The way humans treat the environment and engage with it has acquired a new level of importance in the modern-day discourse. In the section, we analyze a few works of 20th-century English literature that had been created in an era characterized by an enhanced ecological awareness, especially in the Western canon. This new sensibility was a response to the gradual destruction of the natural environment and was expressed in the new environmental movement and nature-conservation agencies. Even though nature writers had to face a growing urban population that appeared to lack interest in their interests, one might argue that nature writers in some way contributed to intensifying the increased interest of the general population towards environmental issues.

This module has been selected on a curated selection of literary works that depict nature as being commensurate with humanity. In these stories, ecological awareness among the writers developed between 1919 and 1968, and the writers involved have a number of relevant comments and concepts that are shared. In point of fact, Romanticism of some interpretations of nature is often checked by realism, and this is witnessed by the sometimes-unromantic portrayals of nature. All narratives, in one way or another, challenge the relationship that man has with the environment or his attitude towards it. In addition, at one point or another, each of the authors has participated in or had an opinion on the effects of industrialisation on the natural sphere, which can be identified through political and technological discourses (Franco & Missemer, 2022).

2.1. Literature Nature and Ecology.

In the 20 th century, nature was becoming a dominant subject, and it was usually aimed at highlighting the changes in the world around. In this respect, the landscape description was



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also included in the artistic depiction such as to outline a character, highlight his inner mood, or express moral values. The number of literary compositions and story lines that question the human nature relationship, the modern scientific philosophy and ecology keeps growing questioning the impact of the environment on humanity and describing the adaptation to the severe climatic and geographic factors. Nature is theorised as a primordial, inert environment, harsh, beautiful, poisonous, puritan, which is pitted against humanity whether in total disinterest or, conversely, constantly active, even assuming the characteristics of a living creature.

The nature of the plot in the 20th-century environmentalist environment also includes an existential crisis that is directly related to the natural nature around. Moreover, here another salient duality of writing may be pointed out. In the setting, characters representative of the environmental movement (especially when the characters are non-human, as the environment in the secondary environment of nature) also face environmental degradation in their applied consciousness and strive to undo this trend. As a result, through its descriptions that predetermined the relationship with nature, with the fall, and with the characters, the artistic sphere was now turned towards humanity as well, and art could not be transported to the realm of business. Defining literature as something than art, why was questioned. Nature writing is used as a type of either sustainability advocacy or writing that goes beyond nature and toward being ecocentric like an approach to ecocentrism promotion, an adventure and experience, or a policy instead of a mass-policy. It was inevitable that the topic turned into an object of activism or social participation demonstrations to all environmentalists. The Movement of the Protection of Birds and Wildlife is one of the most bright examples. There seems to be no end of the specialization of this area as there is in modern technical writing (Ruziyeva & Lobar, 2023).

Conclusion

At first glance, it appears as though 20 th -century English literature has lost its way in terms of linearity. The experience of war as a human phenomenon tested the existing pessimism in the education sphere, which was reflected in literature. At the same time, the literature was not quite subjugated to grand humanistic idealist discourses. Therefore, it is implied that the content and the process cannot be unraveled in 20 th -century English literature. It is divided into two world wars where extensive conflicts are witnessed across the globe and in England. Altogether, the 20 th century was the time of change and transition, which writers predicted as early as the late 1800s. Further, technological advancement and growing global movement



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supported new forms of expression. In these advances new artistic movements were seen as threatening some direly, and as revitalizing others. Discussing the 20 th -century literature, people usually disregard the issues and peculiarities of separate poems, stories, and plays as these general and dramatic transformations were the major concerns of the generation and society. These difficulty of the rhetorical inventions of writers can not be absorbed in the category of oversized labels like modernism, feminism, and post-colonialism, and it means that any systematic analysis of 20 th -century literature should focus on passages in our readings that explicitly mention new identities, shifting gender roles, and threats that we face when dealing with environmental problems in the future and the ideologies that those challenges generate. Therefore whatever conclusion we make concerning the study of 20th -century English literature must of necessity be provisional and forecasting in itself; no road-map to future inquiry can escape these processes, and we must make our inquiry into the realm of literature responsive to the conditions of our age. Literature has a crucial and responsive connection with the societal change, and in certain instances, it has seemingly been an influential instigator of societal change (Mair, 2020).

3.1. Important Results and Future Projections.

The essays included in this collection attempted to cover key thematic that the conference had. We grouped essays around central ideas in order to shed light on the various means of depicting the themes of change and innovation by different metatextual genres and to reconcile these with historical analogs. We learned that the key themes of the conference are interrelated, and that some of the writers address the whole set. This can be explained by the fact that the historical moment required being engaged with science and technology. Early 20th -century science and technology were often perceived as progressive currents that threatened the practice of traditional and religious values, and so writers throughout the period gave it significant focus, along with other movements of the time.

Possible future studies in this field may fruitfully broaden our perspective to include therapy and artificial intelligence, which the conference did not, but which are consistent with the major ideas of the modern day, like health or work/life balance. The world has been altered significantly since the 2019 conference with the pandemic affecting activity in the creative sector. The pandemic will lead to the further marginalization of the already marginalized groups, but will also contain the possibility of opening literature to new audiences and expanding interdisciplinary health narrative attention. In the future, the conferences may be more mobilised and non-Western narratives, folk narratives, non-Western children, and other



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narratives that were previously marginalised could be promoted. They might also open up to new analytical fields in addition to traditional topics, such as the historical or pedagogical worthiness of studying 20th -century exemplifications of change and innovation and translating such texts into alternative formats accessible to non-expert readers. They may also ask how the interests of the 20th century still enlighten and guide us in the 21st century, and how those of the 21st century most wipe out or bring to more light the concerns of the previous century. Change is the most universal of subjects, and we, as scholars in this venture, carry the heavy responsibility of creating and promoting open discussion on this subject. We change in our literature even as we continue to transform it in our turn, decade after decade (Chastain & Lorek, 2020).

Conclusion

Modernism has been central to the transformation of the English literature in the twentieth century, undermining conventionalism and being able to redefine the interrelation between form, language, and meaning. Modern-ist writers also dismissed the orthodox paradigm of realism and linear plot turns in favour of fragmentation, ambiguity, and subjectivity as a response to the overwhelming social, political and psychological turmoil. Modernism opened up new expressive possibilities of the literary language through innovative devices (stream-of-consciousness, unreliable narration, experimental syntax, etc.) that are still echoing up to our days.

In addition, the modernist literature was also characterised by deep disillusionment with established values and institutions especially after the industrialisation and the World Wars. T.S.Eliot, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, and other writers, prophesied the themes of alienation, identity, dislocation of the self, thus reflected the complexities of modern existence in ways never before experienced. Their writings were not just a reflection of the fears of their time, but also a questioning of the existence of any coherence or meaning in a world that was changing at an extremely high pace.

Finally, modernism established the basis of later literary movements in that it made experimentation legitimate as well as rediscovering the limits of literary expression. It has a more far reaching effect beyond the early twentieth century, and influences the post-modern and contemporary writing in form and thematic content. Modernism should also not be seen as just a historical movement but as a change agent that has made an indelible mark in the direction of the English literature.



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